

Bureau Fights Drugs from the Sky



This UH1 Huey is a vital aircraft for search and rescue.

Story and Photos by Paul Koscah

Imagine doing some high-powered crop dusting by rigging a jet fighter to spray poppy, coca or marijuana fields with defoliant.

Then, for a real challenge, imagine doing it at night wearing special night-vision goggles that project the aircraft's instruments directly into the pilot's eye.

These "Star Wars" tactics are not imagination. They're just some of the ways the State Department plans to make it tougher for Latin American drug lords to stay in business.

Not that the bad guys have it easy now.

More than a half million acres of poppies and coca have been destroyed in Colombia since 1991 when the Department established its Office of Aviation at Patrick Air Force Base, Fla. This year the bureau destroyed more than 80,000 acres of Colombian coca, the basic source of cocaine, according to Jack Milavic, who manages airplane standardization for the Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs at Patrick's Cocoa Beach location.

"In 1998 we kept \$4 billion in drugs off U.S. streets," he said of the program's goal of targeting the source of street drugs. "We expect to prevent \$3 to \$5 billion this year—and that's from Colombia alone!"

Attacking drug traffickers early and often, before they strangle a legitimate economy, is the crux of successful drug eradication, according to John McLaughlin, a former Air Force pilot and 22-year Department veteran who commands the bureau's air wing. "If you curtail the drug problem from the beginning, you prevent it from mushrooming," he said.

That strategy paid off in Guatemala where prolific poppy fields once provided a major opium supply for heroin production and in Venezuela where eradication stopped an emerging poppy cultivation threat cold.

Peru and Bolivia, once South America's top producers of coca, are now nearly self-sufficient in running their own counternarcotics air operations after receiving substantial bureau support.

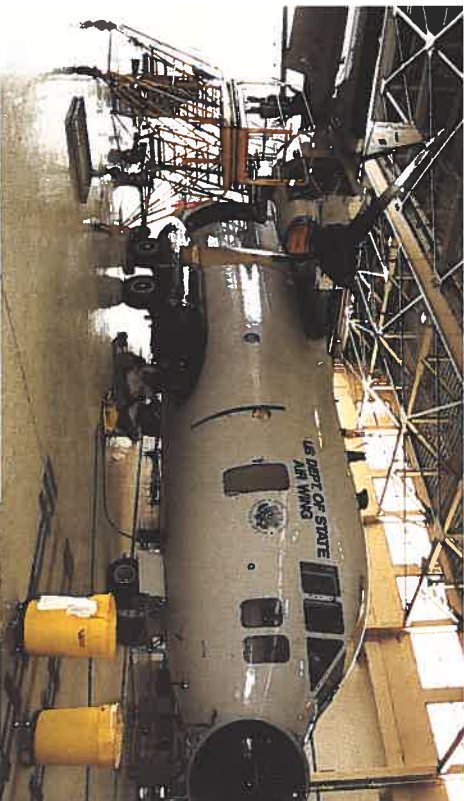
Belize requested the air wing's assistance in battling marijuana cultivation. It responded by working with the Belize defense force in destroying more than 18,000 acres



Jimmy Busquets, left, offers some refresher helicopter training for Luis Rivera.

of the weed, Mr. McLaughlin said. Belize's determination to root out the illicit cash crop even though marijuana trafficking was fast becoming a major economic force, "is a tribute to that nation's government. It was their initiative."

The air wing, however, had mixed success with our southern neighbor. When the United States forged an agreement with Turkey to curtail its poppy production, the demand for Mexican heroin soared. So the bureau worked with Mexican authorities to eliminate nearly 80 percent of the poppy crop, Mr. McLaughlin said.



Left, the Department's C-27 Alouette, an Italian-made transport, gets some routine maintenance.

era platform." The Caravan's computer-driven cameras linked to global positioning satellites can define a crop field to within 9.6 feet. Spraying is performed with the Rockwell OV-10, a Vietnam-era twin-engine turboprop, as well as with the Ayers T-65, another single-engine turboprop that could pass for an air show acrobatic plane. The bureau uses UH1 Huey helicopters for search and rescue support.

"God bless those SARs," said Mr. Milavic, a 12,000-hour pilot who joined the Department in 1999 after a 25-year career with the Federal Aviation Administration.

"They're fantastic. They save lives."

These rescue groups—two helicopters each, one carrying medical personnel and another equipped with defensive weapons manned by nationals—accompany all spraying missions.

That cut the number of U.S. heroin addicts by about 100,000, from an estimated 500,000 to 400,000, even as new Asian sources emerged. But renewed grower tactics, including the scattering of crop fields, he said, made detection and spraying difficult, reversing many of the earlier gains.

The bureau offers host nations equipment and expertise to run their own counterdrug operations. It responds only by request, and its staff follow strict legal guidelines that prohibit military actions



Spray aircraft like this Rockwell OV-10, a Vietnam-era warbird, are kept in top shape.